

# “To Render Them Fruitful”

**“The draining of the swamp lands is not a new idea. Such lands are not only unproductive of anything which can subserve any important purpose, but they are productive of numerous evils. Teeming with miasma, the home of mischievous and annoying insects they are blotches upon the otherwise fair face of nature. To render them fruitful and productive of good rather than evil, is a problem for which a solution has been anxiously sought, but heretofore only partially obtained . . . .”**

*Scientific American, 1868*

## A Position Statement by Twenty-one Key Non-Governmental Organizations

The non-governmental organizations working for the conservation of the Hackensack Meadowlands view the Meadowlands as first and foremost a public trust resource. It was such when the indigenous Leni Lenape hunted and fished along the banks of its cedar swamps. It was throughout the history of our nation, and it is so today. The Meadowlands was and will always be a place where people come to the water. For as long as *Homo sapiens* has inhabited the area, people have made their way through its marshes, down its creeks and to its abundant riches. They came for the fish, birds, waterfowl and other animals that lived there. Later, people came for the Atlantic white-cedar as well. The last of the cedars were being felled as the Twentieth Century dawned. It was then that the Meadowlands ceased to be a source of Nature’s riches and instead became a dump for industry’s waste and a site for urban sprawl.

Ironically, the “solution” to the Scientific American’s “problem” of “rendering” swamp lands “fruitful” created instead the very “miasma,” the very “blotch upon the . . . fair face of nature” that in 1868 the periodical decried. A place that for centuries had supported a diverse and dynamic flora and fauna was expropriated by builders, trash barons, and land speculators. The resulting pollution of the Hackensack River destroyed fisheries and put an end to river-based recreation, driving the citizens of the watershed away from their own river. Untold millions of tons of garbage were dumped into the marshes and waterways. “After all,” prevailing sentiment insisted, “it’s just a stinking swamp. What better place to take

the trash to?” Then in 1923, the Oradell Dam was built about 15 miles upstream, choking off the flow of the Hackensack River and causing saltwater to infiltrate 11 miles upstream from the confluence of Newark Bay, thus killing streamside vegetation that had flourished for millennia. For a long time the common reed, *Phragmites*, was virtually the only plant that grew in the Meadowlands.

But even in the worst of times, the half-century between 1920 and 1970, duck hunters, muskrat trappers, fishermen and other common folk never gave up on the Meadowlands. When science finally caught on to the value of wetlands and government began to take an interest in preserving such places, the common folk users of the Meadowlands showed the way. Local conservation groups beat the drums to gather the troops. In the early ‘70s New Jersey Audubon began regular avifauna surveys in the Meadowlands; Audubon Vice President for Conservation and Stewardship Richard Kane’s 1996 Hackensack Migratory Bird Report quickly proved seminal. In 1990, Andrew Willner began the work of New York / New Jersey Harbor Baykeeper, having built on the momentum started by the American Littoral Society in the 1980s. The Hackensack Meadowlands Preservation Alliance was formed in 1997. The Hackensack Estuary and River Tenders Corporation eventually became Hackensack Riverkeeper. The conservation groups have consistently been the voice and conscience of the common folk who refused to give up.

Today the Hackensack Meadowlands is a resource in recovery. Even though we have lost two-thirds of its land surface area, the ecosystem’s dynamism grows stronger each year as the water gets cleaner and the scars on the land are softened by time. The waters of the Meadowlands are now home to more than 60 species of fish and shellfish. At last count, 63 species of birds were found to nest there, with an additional 200 species utilizing the marsh and adjacent uplands as migratory stopovers. Endangered northern harrier and yellow-crowned night heron are confirmed nesters, and resident ospreys and peregrine falcons utilize the marshes as a primary hunting ground. Over the past two years harbor seals have been observed in the lower Hackensack River feeding on the abundant schools of herring that migrate from the ocean through Newark Bay. With the passing of each day, the seeds of saltmarsh plants from many miles away are borne on the tides to germinate in this “accidental saltmarsh.”

The hunters and fishermen still come, and they are joined by legions of birders, boaters, paddlers and just plain folk who come simply to retreat from the pace of urban life that surrounds the 8,500 acres of water, marshes, and open space that comprise the Meadowlands. The tide has turned, and the story is coming full circle. Government agencies which until very recently were accommodating development in the Meadowlands are now actively working to restore and conserve it. For example, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission have partnered to conduct a feasibility study and to develop a



Captain Bill Sheehan, Hackensack Riverkeeper

comprehensive restoration improvement plan for the Meadowlands. Other governmental and environmental organizations as well as many thousands of “just plain folks” who believe that the highest and best use of the Meadowlands can be achieved only through its restoration and protection, support this partnership.

In 1868, the same year Scientific American informed its readers that swamps were “blotches upon the otherwise fair face of nature” and “unproductive of anything which can subserve any important purpose,” George Cooke, New Jersey’s state geologist, also wrote, “[The Meadowlands] must . . . be reclaimed, so as to be fit either for cultivation, or for occupation with buildings.” The legacy of this line of thought haunts us even at the dawn of the Twenty-First Century. Yet we are finally learning how to “render” the Meadowlands truly “fruitful” again. We have been empowered by the truth that the Hackensack River and the marshes of the Meadowlands, including the fish and wildlife resources they support, do not belong to any particular individual, entity, or organization, public or private. They belong to us.



New York City Skyline from the Meadowlands

Photographs USFWS / Gene Nieminen

*American Littoral Society  
Association of NJ  
Environmental Commissions  
Columbia Law Clinic  
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.  
Environmental Defense  
Hackensack River Symposium,  
Fairleigh Dickinson University  
Hackensack Riverkeeper, Inc.  
Hackensack Partnership  
Hudsonia  
Meadowlands Conservation Trust  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
NJ Audubon Society  
NJ Chapter Sierra Club  
NJ Conservation Foundation  
NJ Environmental Federation  
NJ Environmental Lobby  
NY / NJ Harbor Baykeeper  
Regional Plan Association  
Rutgers Environmental Law Clinic  
The Fyke Nature Association  
The Hudson River Foundation*